

**TESTIMONY OF BRENDA DONALD, CHIEF OF STAFF
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES AGENCY
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES
COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

NOVEMBER 7, 2001

Good morning Chairman Allen and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Brenda Donald, Chief of Staff for the DC Child and Family Services Agency. I am here today to testify in support of Bill 14-379, the “Child and Family Services Agency Licensure Exemption of Certain Court Personnel Act of 2001.”

At the Mayor’s request, on behalf of CFSA, the Council passed the emergency version of this legislation on October 2, 2001. We greatly appreciate the Council’s passage of the emergency legislation, for the same reason we are here today in support of extending the exemption for another three years.

On October 1, CFSA achieved an important milestone – unification of the child abuse and neglect system that had previously operated in a fragmented manner. Under the previously bifurcated system, neglect cases were investigated and managed by CFSA, while abuse cases were investigated by the Metropolitan Police Department and managed by Superior Court’s Child Abuse Unit of the Court Social Services Division. The ending of this bifurcated system was one of the requirements of October 23, 2000, consent order that ended CFSA’s federal court receivership. It was also incorporated

into legislation enacted by the Council in April 2001 that established CFSA as an independent department under the Mayor.

A Memorandum of Understanding was agreed upon in November, 2000 by the Mayor and the Chief Judge of the Superior Court to outline the terms and conditions for the transition of abuse cases to CFSA. The court staffed these cases through both social workers and probation officers. The MOU included an agreement to transfer Court Social Services personnel to CFSA to continue managing the cases that CFSA would now absorb. The intent was to ensure sufficient staff to manage the increased number of cases coming into CFSA, as well as to ensure continuity of services for the children and families being served.

Based upon information provided by the Court, it was anticipated that 23 staff who were working on child abuse cases would transfer to CFSA. The Court and CFSA reached an agreement to facilitate the transfer of personnel, through Inter-Governmental Personal Agreements, and 9 CSS workers agreed to be transferred to CFSA. In anticipation of the approximately 380 new children for whom CFSA would assume responsibility on October 1, we negotiated with the Court to detail another 5 workers under a 6-month temporary assignment, for a total of 14 CSS workers available to manage the additional caseload.

Seven of these employees are probation officers who had been utilized by Court Social Services to provide case management and social work services to children and families. These employees have been effective in meeting the needs of these children, but they are not currently eligible to hold

licenses to practice social work. In view of this, and in light of CFSA's critical staffing shortage, the Mayor requested emergency legislation to allow the probation officers to continue carrying cases. Without the exemption, CFSA would not have been able to absorb the new cases without seriously impacting our already overloaded social workers and potentially adversely affecting the children and families served.

The legislation was narrowly drawn to include only those persons employed by the Court's child abuse unit, who have experience in serving abused and/or neglected children, and who have performed satisfactorily. Now that the abuse and neglect system has been unified under CFSA, the designated personnel serve under the direction of qualified CFSA supervisors.

It is no secret that CFSA is currently faced with a critical shortage of social workers, as is the case for child welfare agencies across the country. As we have reported to you before, we are employing multiple strategies to recruit and retain social workers. It is, in fact, the agency's number one priority. However, even our most ambitious projections indicate that it will take some time to achieve adequate staffing levels.

We also recognize, however, that permanent exemption from licensure requirements is not consistent with how the District has handled transfer of personnel in other contexts. For example, when federal employees from Saint Elizabeth's were transferred, they were given 27 months in which to attain District licenses. In this case, we are suggesting that the legislation include a provision that will require that the affected CSS employees attain

licenses within three years. This period is sufficient to allow the probation officers to obtain the education and experience for license eligibility.

The licensure exemption provision for the Court Social Services workers allows us to fill an immediate need while we are in the process of staffing up. Certainly, we know that we will not be able to recruit, hire and train enough social workers to fill that void when the emergency act expires in less than two months. We therefore request that you enact permanent legislation that will permit the designated workers to continue carrying cases while they are assigned to CFSA up to three years which will allow them time to obtain the necessary credentials to become licensed social workers.

Thank you.